

# The Influence of Folk Culture on British Novel

Lu Gan

School of Foreign Studies, Yangtze University, Hubei Jingzhou, China.

## Abstract

**Under the background of the revival of traditional folk culture, the transmission and continuation of traditional cultural resources are faced with the interaction and game between the traditional oral folk literature and the written literature which closely related to modern printing and publishing industry. Although the heterogeneity between the two is obvious, one can never replace the other. But they can interact and progress together. By tracing the process of the generation and development of the novel as a genre, especially in 19<sup>th</sup> century, a strategy can be constructed to promote the mutual integration of the two, so as to break down the cultural barriers between the folk and the official, to promote the inheritance and innovation of the folk culture, and to better meet the spiritual needs of the people.**

## Keywords

**Folk Culture; Influence; Formation; Development; British Novel.**

## 1. Introduction

From the perspective of the evolution of literary history, the emergence of novel as a new literary genre is due to the continuous development of narrative literary works. The existing literary genres were unable to fully accept the increasingly complex social life and personal experience in modern society. The new cultural reality and its appeal are bound to give birth to a new literary genre.

In Europe, before the emergence of novel as an independent style, the evolution of narrative literary forms had the following obvious trends: from unconscious mythic narration to conscious narration; from folk oral narration to written narration with enhanced artistic aesthetic value; from collective narration to individual narration. The emergence of novel as a genre is far behind the poetry and drama. But from the Renaissance, it had gradually entered the center of the literary system from marginal status, and gradually become an important form of western literary genre after hundreds of years of development. Romanticism is not only the golden age of poetry, but also a very important age in the history of European novel. It was from the age of Romanticism that the novel as a new genre developed into a representative literary category of European literature. (Hanxiong Gong, 2005)

## 2. The Influence of Folk Culture on the Formation of English Novel

There are two different opinions about the origin of novel as a new genre.

Some researchers believe that the novel as a narrative literary genre written in prose has already existed in ancient western literature. The Roman novel *Satyricon* written in the time of Nero by Petronius ( ?~66 ) is the most compelling example. As the first novel in human history, it has acquired typical features of folk culture, interspersed with many folk legends and folk language (including lewd dialogue). It is the characteristic of folk culture that makes this fragile book so vivid. Tall tales, fanciful scenes, emotional declarations of love, and confessions before death, which like flowing pictures come to us and take us back to ancient Roman times. It is the first novel—*Satyricon*— in human history that has defined novel as an actual genre in literature

since Renaissance. The important symbols are Boccaccio's Decameron (about 1350-1353), Francois Rabelais' Gargantua et Pantagruel (1532 ~ 1562) and Cervantes' Don Quixote (1605 ~ 1615), etc. They not only show the brand new life of that age, but also the new spirit of the people in that age. Moreover, these works seems totally different with any previous literary genres and later they are called "novel".

But the majority of the researchers believe that the European novel originated in the 18th century. They consider Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (1719) as the first European novel. The creation of this novel is closely related to some folk street talks. At that time in England, people were talking a great deal about the adventures that befell a Scottish Sailor, Alexander Selkirk, who had been abandoned on a deserted island by the captain of a ship—an island on which he remained alone for four years. This story was narrated in the 2nd edition of a book by Woodes Rogers entitled A Cruising Voyage Round the World. From this book Defoe drew the inspiration for writing, in 1719, the volume entitled The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner.

However, whether the first novels were Satyricon or Robinson Crusoe in the history of literature, they did originate from folk culture. Satyricon originated in romantic folk myths and folk legends, which became the source of the Romantic novels afterwards; and Robinson Crusoe originated in folk street talks, which became the source of the Realistic novels afterwards. It could be clearly seen that novel has never been away from the influence of folk culture in the history of literature, because the novel has always switched between Romanticism and Realism. Obviously, folk culture, including folk songs, folk oral narrative epics and even folk street talks are the foundation of western literary.

In fact, from the point of view worldwide, not only the British novel originated from folk culture. In Egypt, Necromicon kept many Egyptian myths and folk tales; In Greece, Homer's poems contain many folk tales; In India, Jataka is a collection of hundreds of folk tales and Panchatantra is a collection of allegories and fairy tales; In Arabia, there is the collection of the Arabian nights (Shaoyuan Jiang, 1988).

### 3. The Influence of Folk Culture on the Development of English Novel

After novel as a literary genre, it has gradually come to the center in the circle of British literature. To overview the history of British novel there has been a permanent ebb and flow between Romanticism and Realism, and thus has become the impetus of the novel to make continuous progress, and to make it ever charming. In this process, folk culture participated in it in different ways.

Specifically, folk culture closely related to fantastic literature. It could be clearly found that in 18th century there were novels about fantastic voyages led by Daniel Defoe (1660~1731), and Gothic novels led by Horace Walpole (1717~1797), and legendary historical novel by Walt Scotts (1771~1832); in 19th century, there were fairy-tale novels led by John Ruskin and Charles Dickens (1819~1900); and from 20th century up to now, fantasy fiction has become the most popular literary genre.

Then, a concentrative discussion would be made upon the relationship between folk culture and written literature in the 19th century, focusing on the most influential novelists Walt Scott, Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, although a large group of writers in this period were influenced by folk culture.

Sir Walt Scott is best known for his "Waverley Novels" (1814~1832), many of which reflect his interest in "popular antiquities." He was also editor of The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border (1802~1803), largely a collection of Scottish oral materials. His interest in such matters went back to his childhood, particularly to his visits to his grandparent's farm. As a young Edinburgh lawyer, he went on annual "raids" into Liddesdale in the Scottish borders in quest of ballads

and other antiquities in the company of Robert S. Shortreed, the sheriff substitute for Roxburghshire. Practically all the ballads he “collected” in Liddesdale, however, came from a manuscript given to him by a Doctor Elliot of Cleughhead in Liddesdale. The *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802~1803) actually draw from printed, manuscript, and oral sources and included thoughtful introductory commentaries to individual texts. The overall introduction dealt with questions concerning the historicity of many of the ballad stories and their literary qualities. It is not, however, *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802~1803) that best illustrates Walt Scott’s attitudes toward folk tradition but rather the *Waverley* novels, especially those whose action takes place in Scotland or involves Scottish characters. (George W. Boswell, 1974) Scott’s depiction of the folk in these novels goes far beyond the occasional inclusion of a storyteller, a singer of ballads, a fiddler, a fortune-teller, a purveyor of proverbs and sayings, or not a matter of social stratum or cultural level but rather what might be called register. For Scott, folk only exist as individuals, or rather, folk-culture behavior is displayed by certain appropriate individuals at certain appropriate occasions, by some more often and more consistently than by others. Scott the novelist never ceased to be Scott the folklorist.

Charles Dickens is considered by many people to be the greatest English novelist of his own or any other era. During the remainder of his life, Dickens turned out a large number of books of very high quality. Many of his volumes indicated the society of his era, especially its mistreatment of children and the poor. He was very skillful at creating characters representing a broad range of emotions, speech patterns and other elements of folk culture, to bring them to life. Perhaps his own fascination with many types of folk culture led him to include such materials in his writings. He did not just use items of folk culture he knew from experience, he also made specific attempts to collect material to be used in his novels. For example, he sought out slang terms to be used in *Hard Times* (1854) from various friends and he used proverbs “wellerism” (Meidier Wolfgang, George B. Bryan and Stewart A. Kinsbury, 1994)—an important genre of folk literature—creatively in *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1837). In the latter novel, the character Samuel Weller frequently adds a phrase or clause that casts a traditional saying in a new light. Dickens use these sayings to make comments of an ironic, detached, and often humorous sort on sociopolitical issues of the day. Although Dickens did not even invent this usage, the extensive number of examples in the same novel has led scholars to designate them “wellerism”. (George B. Bryan and Meidier Wolfgang, 1997) His popularization of this subgenre of proverbs proved useful in stimulating a large number of wellerism collections. They serve a variety of purposes in his novels, including characterization, humor, punning, metaphorization, dramatization, and leitmotifs, that is, they are regularly used with specific characters as their identifying phrase.

As a novelist, Thomas Hardy created in “Wessex” one of the most credible region of imagination in British literature. the apparent real Wessex—rural southern England of the 1840s—owes much to Hardy’s interest in folk culture and care to describe it accurately: Hardy assured the folklorist Edward Clodd that he had not invented any of the folklore in his novels. This claim to authenticity extends to dialect terms, beliefs, customs, dramas, songs, narratives and folklife in the sense of the occupations and ways of life that define a vernacular region. (Ruth A. Prior, 1962) Hardy’s interest in folk culture related much to his family. He was born into a family of storytellers and village musicians: his mother was his source for many supernatural legends, and his father, a mason, played both church and secular music. His major novels *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891) all involve conflict between older communication values in Wessex and intruding representatives of modernity and capitalism. *Jude the Obscure* (1895) shows Wessex destroyed by these forces. The most direct transportation of local legend into literary form occurs in Hardy’s short-story collections *Wessex Tales* (1888), the most notable one is “*The Superstitious Man’s Story*”, with its motif of the soul leaving the body as a moth. It

is in the stories, especially those involve ghosts, that Hardy draws unself-consciously closest to folk tradition, so that stories of fateful and supernatural encounters heard from his family in Dorset become as influential as reading in classical and modern literature for his thought and literary creation.

#### 4. Summary

Diachronically, the British novel has been permeated with the influence of folk culture, from its formation to its further development. The rise of folk culture in the 19th century stimulated the writer's interests in folk literature, especially fairy tales, and thus led fairy-tales novels reached zenith in the history of British literature. The common prosperity of folk culture and written literature thus achieved. In this way, folk culture which permeated with the character of a nation but ever asleep radiated its energy again, and written literature also reached its peak.

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